NEWS ANALYSIS 1-1403 SEPTEMBER 6, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

FORD AND CARTER-- THE FINAL EIGHT WEEKS

ANNCR: ON AMERICA'S LABOR DAY, THE TRADITIONAL STARTING POINT FOR ELECTION CAMPAIGNS, CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE: DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER-- FOLLOWING TRADITION-- IS LAUNCHING HIS FORMAL CAMPAIGN WITH A FULL SCHEDULE OF LABOR DAY APPEARANCES. REPUBLICAN GERALD FORD-- BREAKING WITH TRADITION-- IS DELAYING THE START OF HIS CAMPAIGN FOR ANOTHER WEEK. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE DIFFERENT STARTING DATES IS NO DOUBT LOST ON THE AMERICAN VOTER WHO HAS BEEN WATCHING AND LISTENING TO BOTH CANDIDATES FOR MORE THAN A YEAR AS THEY STRUGGLED FOR AND FINALLY WON THEIR RESPECTIVE PARTY NOMINATIONS. THAT SAME VOTER EXPECTS TO SEE AND HEAR MUCH MORE BEFORE ELECTION DAY, NOVEMBER SECOND.

AS THE FINAL PHASE OF THIS LONG ELECTION YEAR BEGINS, POLLS MAKE JIMMY CARTER THE EARLY FAVORITE. BUT EVEN THE DEMOCRAT'S OWN STAFF IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE DURABILITY OF THESE STATISTICS WHICH IN RECENT WEEKS HAVE RESEMBLED THE FLUCTUATIONS OF A WEATHER CHART MORE THAN A SCIENTIFIC SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION.

SEVERAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE VOLATILITY OF THESE FIGURES, BEGINNING WITH THE RECENT DECLINE OF PARTY DISCIPLINE AND THE FACT THAT VOTERS PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE MAN THAN TO HIS PARTY LABEL. ALTHOUGH THE TWO CANDIDATES OFFER SHARPLY DIFFERENT POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES, ESPECIALLY TOWARD DOMESTIC MATTERS, THEY WILL BE JUDGED-- MOST EXPERTS AGREE-- LARGELY ON THEIR PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS. THUS, ON THE ONE SIDE STANDS MISTER CARTER-- VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN TO THE ELECTORATE ONE YEAR AGO WHOSE PROMISE TO INJECT NEW LEADERSHIP AND MORAL

VALUES IN THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT HAS YET TO BE TESTED. ON THE OTHER SIDE STANDS MISTER FORD-- WHO TWO YEARS AGO ASSUMED A JOB HE NEVER SOUGHT AND WHOSE POSITION AS PARTY LEADER REMAINED IN DOUBT UNTIL HIS NARROW NOMINATION VICTORY OF LAST MONTH.

THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE ELECTION OUTCOME IS FURTHER UNDERSCORED BY RECENT SURVEYS SHOWING A DECLINING INTEREST IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS AND THE ABSENCE OF PARTISAN SENTIMENT TOWARD THIS YEAR'S CANDIDATES. WHAT IS MOST LIKELY TO CHANGE THIS SEEMING DISINTEREST ARE THE THREE SCHEDULED TELEVISED DEBATES. ON THOSE OCCASIONS THE ENTIRE VOTING POPULATION WILL HAVE THE CHANCE TO VIEW THESE TWO VERY DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES AT CLOSE RANGE AND ON THE SAME STAGE AND TO COMPARE THE CARTER PROMISE WITH THE FORD RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT. NEVER BEFORE HAS AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT ENGAGED IN PUBLIC DEBATE, A DEBATE THAT MISTER FORD HIMSELF PROPOSED. AND NEVER BEFORE HAVE AMERICAN VOTERS HAD A BETTER OPPORTUNITY TO JUDGE THE MEN IN WHOSE HANDS THEY WILL PLACE THEIR TRUST ON ELECTION DAY.

GH/CM